

The "I AM" statements found throughout the Bible provide us the ultimate platform in which to lay out how we can all live into our covenant relationship with God. Whether you are one who is 70 years into your faith journey or 70 seconds and are just inquiring, these declarations help create quite the mosaic/ tapestry of God. Two of the statements serve as bookends and seven more help complete the picture.

The two bookends are found in Exodus and Revelation. On the front end, in Exodus, we read that God appeared to Moses in the burning bush and told him to go to Egypt to lead the Israelites out of slavery. In response, Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Exodus 3:13-14). When God identified as I AM WHO I AM, it meant that, no matter when or where, God is there. This is tied to the back end, where in Revelation 1:8 John declares God's claim, "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, 'who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.'" This is true of God for all time, but it would have been especially appropriate for a message in Moses' day to a people in slavery and who could see no way out. I AM was promising to free them, and they could count on God!

The seven statements that complete the filling of the mosaic/ tapestry maintain the power and majesty of God while also including the closeness and humility of God's care for us. Each of the seven are bold declarations from Jesus about Jesus, who has come to reveal the very nature of God. "I am the bread of life." (John 6:35) Bread is an ordinary source of food one could not live without its sustenance. "I am the light of the world." (John 8:12) Light is essential for life to grow- it provides nutrients as well as guidance. "I am the door/gate." (John 10:7) Here Jesus speaks of entry and access to God. "I am the good shepherd." (John 10:11-14) A good shepherd guides and walks with and protects and provides for the sheep of the pasture. "I am the resurrection and the life." (John 11:25) Not even death could hold the life-giving Jesus back. "I am the way, the truth, and the life." (John 14:6) Jesus is the north star, the focal point, the map. "I am the vine." (John 15:1) Jesus is the vine. We are the branches. And as a branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can we unless we abide in Jesus. I would like to expand on this last statement today.

In understanding the nature of fruit growing on a vine, for example grapes, grapes on the vine are not exhausted by effort. Instead, the grapes trust in the vine's nutrients. Christians

who rely on Christ trust the growth to come through Him. Like a child in the womb relies on the mother's nutrients transferred through the umbilical cord.

*The alarm rang through the empty school hallways, bouncing off lockers and catching the attention of each focused classroom. Students straightened up in their seats. "Sweet! A fire drill to get us out of class!" Teachers, disgruntled at the inconvenience of another drill, gathered the attention of the class and proceeded to carry out the routine of the drill procedure. As the students filed into the hallways, they were astonished to see billowing smoke circling through the building. This wasn't a drill; this was the real deal- fire was making its way through the school. Chaos and frenzied emotions quickly mounted as the front lawn filled with students and faculty. They watched as flames engulfed the school. A quick head count revealed a startling reality- numerous students were unaccounted for. They were still inside the building. After the incident, the school board met to determine the magnitude of the loss- not only the loss of classrooms and supplies, but also the tragic loss of life. It was soon discovered that the building was not equipped with a sprinkler system. In an effort to begin the healing and rebuilding process, the school board decided on a state-of-the-art sprinkler system that would be installed in the new school building. By the grand opening, the sprinkler system was in place and student life resumed to a new normal. The school's janitorial staff paid close attention to every nook and cranny of the building. While making the rounds in the basement one morning, a janitor discovered a scandalous mistake in the new sprinkler system. It was state of the art, but never connected to the water source. It was a well-planned and constructed system without the only step that mattered- connection to the water source. Should a fire come again, the sprinklers would be useless. Connection to the source was key to its purpose.*

Our abiding relationship with God/ Jesus is the power for life. *"The Christian life is neither hard nor difficult; it is actually impossible without abiding in Christ. To abide in Christ means to have a desperate dependence and a restful residence in the Lord."* (Gregg Matte)

A clarity we gain from this declaration of Jesus is that the call upon our lives is not to bear fruit but to abide. If we abide, when we abide, the fruit will take care of itself. **If we abide deeply, we will achieve eternally.** John 15:5 says, "apart from me you can do nothing" and 15:16 says, "go and bear fruit- fruit that will last." Matte reflects personally, "Abiding in the vine bears lasting fruit, while life in my strength amounts to nothing. I may be busy, but I will accomplish nothing for eternity unless I abide."

To abide with Jesus as the vine presents a diagram for life in love with Jesus, not just undertaking Christian activities for Him.

A devoted Iowa couple married for 72 years died holding hands in the hospital last week, exactly one hour apart. The passing reflected the nature of their marriage, where “As a rule, everything was done together,” said the couple’s daughter Donna Sheets, 71. Gordon Yeager, 94, and his wife, Norman, 90, left their small town of State Center, Iowa, on Wednesday to go into town, but never made it. A car accident sent the couple to the emergency room and intensive care unit with broken bones and other injuries. But, even in the hospital, their concerns were each other. “She was saying her chest hurt, and what’s wrong with Dad? Even laying there like that, she was worried about Dad,” said the couple’s son, Dennis Yeager, 52. “And his back was hurting and he was asking about Mom.” When it became clear that their conditions were not improving, the couple was moved into a room together in beds side-by-side where they could hold hands. “They joined hands; his right hand, her left hand,” Sheets said. Gordon Yeager died at 3:38 p.m. He was no longer breathing, but the family was surprised by what his monitor showed. “Someone in there said, ‘Why, then, when we look at the monitor is the heart still beating?’” Sheets recalled. “The nurse said Dad was picking up Mom’s heartbeat through Mom’s hand.” “And we thought, ‘Oh my gosh, Mom’s heart is beating through him,’” Dennis Yeager said.

That’s it! God’s heart beats through us for the world to see. As we hold hands and hearts with the vine, Jesus’ pulse becomes ours and Jesus’ life becomes ours. Jesus is the vine; we are the branches and Jesus’ heartbeat is the fruit. Seeing what Jesus does changes what I am to do. Jesus’ actions are to become my actions. Jesus’ heartbeat becomes mine.

What are we to do? For some few of us, abiding in Christ will be a mystical experience which is beyond words to express. For most of us, it will mean a constant contact with God. It will mean arranging life, arranging prayer, arranging silence in such a way that there is never a day when we give ourselves a chance to forget God.

No analogy is perfect but this is good food for thought. Suppose a person is weak. Fallen temptation, made a mess of things, on the way down to degeneracy of mind and heart and mental fiber. Now suppose that a friend of a strong and lovely and loving nature comes alongside and rescues the one who is weak. There is only one way in which the weak can retain reformation and stay on the right track and that is staying in contact with the strong friend. If contact is lost, all chances are that the weakness will overcome and rule, the temptations will rear their heads again. Salvation lies for the weak in the continual contact with the strength of the friend.

“Abide with me” Jesus said. “Rest in me.” **If we abide deeply, we will achieve eternally.**